



Linda D'Agostino and Mike Pyles

Lion-Hearted Lung Cancer Victim Spurs Action in the Heart of Radon Country

By Kevin M. Stewart
American Lung Association in the Mid-Atlantic

Colleagues, we have a new whirlwind in our midst. Cancer Survivors Against Radon has yet another sparkplug in its arsenal. And some men, women, and children have already begun owing their lives to a surprising fighter and advocate.

Her name is Linda D'Agostino. She is as untiring in her work to save lives from radon as anyone with stage 4 lung cancer can be. Linda was diagnosed in 2006 and given a year or two to live. Of course, while most people at this stage of illness aren't expected to make good on guarantees for a positive outcome, those of you who have met Linda already know that she had other ideas! She's had a lobectomy and she still needs regular chemotherapy. But the facts not only that she is outrunning the odds and is still with us, but also that she is a leader among us, are testimony to the sheer force of her character and her will to thrive, not merely survive.

Linda's story began in 1999, when she and her husband Michael decided to move with their year-old daughter Mikayla from the suburbs of Long Island, N.Y., to the Lancaster County, Pa., countryside. During the home inspection process, Linda relates how she was at once introduced to the word "radon" and dissuaded from testing for it as it was "nothing to worry about." Six years later, the D'Agostinos chose to move again, and it was upon the inspection by the buyer of their house that they learned of a result of 87 pCi/L. In fact, the buyer, who did mitigate the house, warned Linda that she would "die from lung cancer" as a result of this exposure.

The D'Agostino family with Mike Pyles and Kevin Stewart



The D'Agostinos built their next home and made sure it was properly mitigated. Three months after moving in, on September 28, 2006, Linda was diagnosed with metastasized lung cancer. So began her journey through surgery and treatment, and as a wife and mother dealing with a new reality. That brings us to 2010 and the current chapter.

Linda had felt so alone in her struggle, both as a person who had stopped smoking for her health only to be confronted by a strange new attacker, and even as a parent dealing with the feelings of having unwittingly subjected her daughter to some of the same risk. Then, on January 15, in a TODAY show interview, Dr. Roshini Raj, Health magazine's medical editor, included radon testing as an important thing to do and posted an EPA webpage.

Things started moving very quickly. That same day, Linda found herself talking to Mike Pyles, Radon Division Chief at PA DEP, who helped her get in touch with Gloria Linnertz and CanSAR, and Linda mentioned her concerns about the radon issue in a note to Lancaster Sunday News editor Marv Adams, who had been working on a story about her father, who in turn had encouraged Mr. Adams to devote some ink to Linda's story. As a result, (to Linda's surprise) two days later, a piece by Mr. Adams incorporating her note was circulated to over 100,000 homes.

January 15, 2010, was a clearly a remarkable day for Linda. In an email that day to her friends and family, she wrote (in part):

"This is a part of my cancer fight ... to help educate you all about the dirty little silent secret called RADON I have been hitting a brick wall..... Today God answered my prayers and I was finally heard.

"I am now in touch with Mike Pyles and I will be joining them on their battle in raising this awareness along with getting the support I need from people who like me have been diagnosed with Lung Cancer due to Radon exposure. I thought I might be alone but come to find out I am not.

"I refuse to lay down and be quiet about this. This will not be the last time you hear about this from me and I pray you all join me on my journey and help me to raise this awareness."

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Lion-Hearted Cancer Victim

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Needless to say, Mrs. Linnertz was not sitting on her hands either. The same Sunday that Linda's letter to Mr. Adams came out, Gloria was beating down the (electronic) doors of the major Lancaster television station, WGAL-TV 8, whose broadcast and cable-carried area includes a population exceeding two million – with phone and email communications to the news directors encouraging them to feature Linda and her story.

From those first contacts, things kept growing and involving more people. Mr. Pyles discussed Linda's account with the author, who had his own talks with Linda and Susan Shapiro (News 8 On Your Side medical reporter) in support of the work Gloria had done. By the last week of January, WGAL was on board and looking to set up a two-part program for the evening newscast – an story focusing on an interview with Linda herself one evening, followed by a call-in panel of experts for brief interviews the following evening. Work began to line up the panelists.

Adding to the excitement and public interest was an excellent Sunday News piece on January 31 by Marv Adams expanding on the original small item appearing two weeks earlier. Read it at <http://articles.lancasteronline.com/local/4/248112>.

Plans were made to air Linda's interview and to conduct the call-in panel on the second week of February. WGAL started

to run promotional spots. But readers anywhere near the eastern U.S. will not be surprised to learn that those dates were snowed out. So TV 8 postponed things to the following week. They ran more promos, for the new dates.

Finally, the weather cleared and Linda's compelling interview (see <http://www.wgal.com/video/22595955/index.html>) aired on February 17 and brought anticipation to a fever pitch. On the following night, from the time the phones went live during the 5 p.m. news broadcast, they rang off the hook and didn't stop until the station shut down the event at 6:30. We had eight panelists altogether:

- Mike Pyles and Matt Shields of the PA Department of Environmental Protection
- Alan Peterson, MD, Director of Environmental Medicine with Lancaster General Health
- Samuel Kerr, MD, Oncologist with Lancaster General Medical Group
- Jay Bauder of Bauder Basement Systems, Inc.
- Matthew Steger of WIN Home Inspection
- Kevin Stewart of the American Lung Association in the Mid-Atlantic
- And last, but not least, Linda D'Agostino herself.

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Cancer Victim

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According to Jay Bauder, "I estimate I took 40 to 50 calls. The producer said he had never seen that tremendous a response with any phone bank before. Apparently the volume of calls was so great that it shut down phone service to the rest of the building and the surrounding neighborhoods!"



Dr. Peterson, in a letter of thanks to the station director, wrote, "I have been speaking about the problems of radon for over 25 years now....I believe that this is the type of information that should be shared on a yearly basis with the public..."

Bill Field wrote Linda to say, "Thank you so much for the wonderful interview you gave to get the word out. You have saved lives of people (who will now test and mitigate) you will never meet. Believe me, needless lung cancers will be prevented due to your efforts. As a Lancaster native, your story touches me even more."

And the author is not aware of another media effort that specifically confronted the issue of smokers and former smokers being at increased risk for lung cancer because of their radon exposure as much as this campaign did. Those persons are the usually-ignored majority of lung cancer victims of radon.

Meanwhile, on March 1, across the river in the county next door, the story of another person, a 54-year-old gentleman whose privacy columnist Larry Hicks protected by calling "Yankee," appeared in The York Dispatch. Yankee is a lifelong nonsmoker who recorded a radon level of 46 pCi/L in the basement of his home of 27 years. Yankee, like Linda, has stage 4 lung cancer.

People like Linda and Yankee are out there. Look for them. Encourage them to tell their stories. As John Mallon wrote, "Their willingness to share their private distress ... is outstanding for awareness." Help them to put a face on radon-related lung cancer.



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